

Waters: A pastor and a prophet departs Idlewild

By [David Waters](#) Published: May 06, 2019 4:00 AM CT



On Sunday, May 5, Rev. Dr. Steve Montgomery preached his final sermon as a church pastor. After 39 years in the pulpit, including the past 19 in Memphis as Idlewild Presbyterian Church's senior pastor, Montgomery is retiring. "In another life I might have played first base for the Atlanta Braves, or sung tenor at the Metropolitan Opera," he told the packed sanctuary on Sunday. "But I have only one life to live. I am grateful God made me a pastor to you." (Patrick Lantrip/Daily Memphian)

No doubt there were times in his life when Rev. Dr. Steve Montgomery would have traded his clergy vestment and collar for a baseball uniform and cap.

His boyhood dream was to play ball for his beloved Braves, like his hero Warren Spahn, the winningest left-handed pitcher of all time.

Fortunately, God called the much younger lefty to play for another team, the Presbyterians. They needed him more than the Braves.



David Waters

And Memphis needed this pastoral, prophetic minister in the pulpit, not on the pitching mound. Sunday, Montgomery preached his final sermon as a church pastor. After 39 years in the pulpit, including the past 19 here as Idlewild's senior pastor, Montgomery is retiring.

"Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth," he told the packed sanctuary. It was a genuine expression of his own deep gratitude as well as an homage to baseball great Lou Gehrig's famous farewell 80 years ago.

"In another life I might have played first base for the Atlanta Braves, or sung tenor at the Metropolitan Opera," he said, waggishly and wistfully. "But I have only one life to live. I am grateful God made me a pastor to you."

Since Montgomery arrived here from Atlanta in 2000, he has played another role: pastor to the entire beloved community. No one has done more to extend "radical hospitality," as theologian Henri Nouwen called it.

"Steve has made us stronger as people of faith by uniting instead of dividing through a questioning, progressive and inclusive faith," said Rabbi Micah Greenstein, senior rabbi of Temple Israel.

Idlewild Presbyterian Church has a history of doing that. In the 1960s, legendary pastor Paul Tudor Jones refused to segregate the congregation.

"This is not my church, but it is not your church either. It is God's church, and any child of God, regardless of color, can worship here," Jones said in a sermon one Sunday morning.

Montgomery told that story in a sermon two months ago. He alluded to it again Sunday.

He thanked the congregation for giving him the "freedom in the pulpit" to address racism, poverty, homophobia, xenophobia and other social, political and personal matters.

He also thanked them for "opening the doors of the church" to all people, "because that's what we do." That's what Montgomery has done here for the past two decades.

He invited people of all religious and political persuasions to come to Idlewild and pray for peace after 9/11, and again in the buildup to the invasion of Iraq.

He invited Jews from Temple Israel and Muslims from Memphis Islamic Center and adherents of other faiths to meet regularly with his parishioners to share food, fellowship and discussions of faith.

"Pastor Steve has shown a shining example of what true, faithful Christians are like, just as it is described to us in the Quran," said Dr. Bashar Shala of the Memphis Islamic Center.

He opened the church to the hungry and homeless, HIV/AIDS victims, LGBTQ, undocumented men, women and children, and others who have found themselves left out or locked out or chased out. “We have disillusioned a whole generation of young people who learned that song ‘They’ll Know We Are Christians by our Love’ and now have turned away in frustration,” Montgomery said.

“One of the most basic themes of Scripture is the essential dignity and equality of all of God’s beloved children.”

Montgomery has worked hard on the left side of the Presbyterian aisle.

He helped lead the Presbytery of the Mid-South to change its definition of marriage from “a man and a woman” to “two people,” and to allow its ministers to perform same-sex marriages where it is legal.

He and the congregation hosted the controversial 2014 regional meeting of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, established to further the inclusion of LGBTQ persons.

He’s also reached out to the right side.

He attended the 2011 General Assembly of the politically and theologically conservative Evangelical Presbyterian Church here in Memphis. The EPC is a new home for pastors and congregations who left the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) – Montgomery’s denomination.

“God is bigger than any church, denomination or faith,” Montgomery said. “Our churches have different worship styles, theologies, and appeal to different people, and that’s OK.”

That’s OK to some, not to others.

Montgomery knows that some in the congregation and the larger Presbyterian world think he has been too bold. And others think he hasn’t been bold enough.

“Steve has a deep sense of his congregants, of how they may be engaged,” renowned theologian Dr. Walter Brueggemann wrote in a foreword to Montgomery’s collected sermons.

“The truth he speaks is offered in graciousness and gentleness, spoken not to confront or to irritate but to permit movement to a new way in the world that is marked by glad gospel obedience.”

Montgomery calls it moving toward hope.

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It’s the message he tried to convey during his 19 years in Memphis – in the 700 sermons he preached, the 350 baptisms, 135 weddings and 333 funerals he presided over, and the countless community gatherings he hosted or attended.

“My approach has been: This is what I see Scripture telling us. Come let us reason together. Come let us love each other and grow together, using Jesus Christ as the focus,” he said. “Let’s look at his life and the people he hung out with and ate with and touched. Let’s not get hung up on one verse from Timothy or Paul or Leviticus.”

Montgomery has a master’s degree from Yale Divinity School and a doctorate from Columbia Theological Seminary. But early in his ordained ministry, he spent four years as pastor of a small church in Appalachian Kentucky.

“I learned that folks there don’t care if you know (theologians such as) Barth or Bonhoeffer or Tillich,” he said. “They just want to know if you know Jesus and love them and him.”

The Idlewild congregation has gotten the message. During Sunday’s service, they surprised Montgomery by singing a new hymn they had commissioned just for him: “We gladly hear of love and grace,” written by Thomas Troeger, one of Montgomery’s favorite hymn writers.

The fourth and final verse ends with: “A pastor and a prophet too who with the Spirit’s fire has brought us to your word anew to challenge and inspire.”

Steve Montgomery: [12 things I have learned in the ministry](#)

Montgomery, not one to be out-sung, had a surprise gift of his own for the congregation Sunday. He gave two benedictions.

The first was more traditional: "Finally, brothers and sisters, live in peace. And may the God of love and peace be with you."

The second was more personal. As he walked down the aisle one last time, he sang lyrics written by one of his favorite Presbyterian ministers and theologians, Mr. Rogers.

It's you I like,
It's not the things you wear,
It's not the way you do your hair,
But it's you I like
The way you are right now,
The way down deep inside you –
Not the things that hide you,
Not your toys –
They're just beside you.
But it's you I like,
Every part of you,
Your skin, your eyes, your feelings
Whether old or new.
I hope that you'll remember
Even when you're feeling blue
That it's you I like,
It's you yourself,
It's you,
It's you I like.